

Wake Up with Jacob sermon series
Sermon #1 – Getting Off on the Wrong Foot
Gen. 25:19-34
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You probably know the name Israel as a geographic place in the Middle East. You may also know the name Israel as a description of a certain group of people, like the Israelites, God's chosen ones. But you may not know that before Israel was a country or a group of people, Israel was a man. Israel was the father of the 12 children who would become the forefathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. One of his sons, Joseph had a really cool play made about him. Israel, who was a grandson of Abraham and son of Isaac, inherited God's blessing and became the father of the great nation that would bear his name.

But before he was the forefather of faith, Israel had another name. Jacob. The story of Jacob is not the kind of story you'd expect for such a hero of faith. From the moment of his birth, Jacob led a less-than-honorable life, culminating in a wrestling match worthy of pay-per-view television and his new name.

During the next few weeks (except for next week when I'm on vacation), we'll be taking a look at the life of Jacob before he came Israel. What we'll pay special attention to during this time is how God can work through such a seedy character to carry on his promise. I pray that as we "Wake Up with Jacob" that we'll also be awakened to the many ways God is at work around us.

To understand the story of Jacob, we have to go back a few generations. Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, received a blessing from God, a promise that he would be made into a great nation and he would be a blessing to all peoples on the earth. After a few false starts and close calls, that promise was eventually passed onto his son, Isaac, with the idea that the promise would then be passed onto Isaac's son.

That's where we pick up today's story. Like the story of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah's journey starts with barrenness. But instead of a long, drawn-out narrative, we are simply told that Isaac prays to God and Rebekah become pregnant. That sounds just too easy, but if you read the story carefully you realize there was twenty years in between Isaac's prayer and the birth of their first children. Twenty years is a long time to wait for a prayer to be answered, but the point is it was answered.

Boy, was it answered! Be careful what you ask for, right? "Lord, please give us a son...wait, I only asked for one!" Did you know that in our little church we have five sets of twins? Matt and Jessica Wilson, Lindsey and Virginia Biede, Amelia and Sara Larimer, Andrew and Abigail Keevens, and Matthew and Amanda Murbach. That's a lot of twins! But I'm willing to bet that none of those twins' parents experienced what Rebekah experienced during her pregnancy.

Two of my greatest memories of Leigh's pregnancies with Sydney and Molly are the first times I felt each of them move. I remember placing my hand on Leigh's belly and feeling that little "thump" against my hand. It made it all real to me, and it's the moment I truly fell in love with my girls.

Rebekah's memories of that aren't quite as pleasant. Now, I would assume that two babies in a womb would make twice as much movement as one, but what Rebekah as feeling wasn't gentle thumps, it was beatdowns and body slams! These two boys,

destined to be in conflict with each other once they were born, were getting a headstart on things. So Rebekah, probably feeling a bit like a punching bag, asks the Lord what's going on and receives this cryptic oracle about her soon-to-be born sons. She learns that whoever comes out second will actually come in first, because, as God says, "The older will serve the younger."

When the boys are born, the first one who comes out is hairy and red. Now, I've only been present at two births in my life, but if either of my children had come out hairy and red, I'm not quite sure how I would have reacted. Closely following Esau was his brother, who was so eager to be first that he actually grabbed onto the heel of his older brother. The name "Jacob" means "he grabs the heel," or more figuratively, "he supplants" or "he deceives."

Right from the start, the two boys couldn't have been more different. Now that I have two children, I can relate to this. Our girls have the same parents, the same genes, are brought up in the same household, read the same books, but Leigh and I are increasingly seeing how different they are. Sydney is the cautious one, Molly is the risk-taker. Sydney is a picky eater, Molly is the human garbage disposal. Sydney was slow to crawl and walk but had several words in her vocabulary when she turned one. Molly crawled and six months and is walking, but is just now starting to say words. It's a fascinating study in human nature to see how children grow up differently.

Jacob and Esau were no different. Esau was a hunter, a gatherer, a man's man. Jacob was the more quiet, stay-at-home type who liked to cook. If Esau lived today he would wear flannel, chew tobacco, and drive a big souped-up pickup truck to his cabin in Wisconsin. Jacob would be more comfortable in a suit and tie at the office, driving his Lexus downtown to take in a play or go to the Art Institute. Esau was more favored by his father Isaac, while Rebekah favored Jacob, maybe because she remembered God's oracle and wanted to side with a winner.

Because of their differences and parental favorings, Jacob and Esau simply didn't get along. That plays itself out in the story about the birthright. Now, in our culture today it's hard for us to understand the importance of birthright, but in ancient times the birthright meant everything. Along with the first-fruits of the soil and the firstborn of a flock, the first male son was considered a sacred possession of God and was bequeathed the family birthright. It represented the extra rights that would normally go to the eldest son, including leadership in the family and a double share of the inheritance. Having the birthright was the meal ticket to continued success and authority, and Esau had it.

Until we get to this strange recounting of how Esau lost his birthright. He comes in from the field, famished, and sees his little brother preparing a pot of red stew. It must have smelled like one of Leigh's dinners, because Esau begs for a bowl. Jacob, the deceiver, sees an opening, and offers a bargain: a bowl of stew for the birthright. Now, most people in their right mind would scoff at such an offer, but Esau was focused only on immediate gratification. He only cared about what could serve him here and now, trading what was enduring for what was simply transitory. And through this exchange, Jacob not only inherits the birthright, but also God's blessing, passed down from Abraham to Isaac, and now to Jacob. Through Jacob's sly conniving, the older now serves the younger and God's prophecy is fulfilled.

Why did God choose Jacob over Esau? Why not let the social system play itself out, why not let the older son truly inherit what was his right to inherit? Obviously,

neither of these two men seems worthy of God's blessing. Esau may be impetuous, but Jacob is no saint. But why Jacob?

It could be that God wanted to reiterate a statement he had already made with Cain and his brother Abel, and Isaac and his brother Ishmael. In both those stories, the younger brother is more favored by God. God is making a statement that the world's rules don't apply to God's kingdom. Just because the world says someone is better, more privileged, more worthy of notoriety, doesn't mean that God has to comply. Jacob's life was a scandal, and God's work in this world is scandalous, it goes against what the world says is the right way. God's birth-order inversions, echoed in Jesus' statements about the last being first, affirm that believers are not fated to the way the world is presently organized. To those who are disadvantaged or marginalized, that's the essence of the good news for them. As Christians who have been greatly blessed and live privileged lives, it's our job to make sure that God's kingdom takes precedence over worldly conventions in the way we live out our faith.

Another reason God chose Jacob is that Jacob may have had what God was looking for in a promise-bearer. He was survivor. He had a holy stubbornness about him. While Esau was ready to give up the future for a bowl of soup, Jacob was tenacious, grabbing at the heels of destiny, trusting in the promise of a future blessing that he could not yet see or taste.

Esau treated what was valuable as something worthless. As Haddon Robinson said, Esau sacrificed the permanent on the altar of the immediate. That's easy to do. It's so tempting to seek instant gratification instead of wait patiently for a greater blessing. How often do we exchange the spiritual for the material? How often do we trade in our time with God for something more immediately entertaining? It's so tempting to do these days. But Jacob trusted that time invested in God would bear greater rewards.

And yet, despite Jacob's endearing qualities, so much about him is despicable. In fact, all the characters in Genesis are less than perfect. They cheat, steal, deceive, plot, murder, and lie. And yet God has chosen them. How will God work through such a person as Jacob? How can God take this wheeler-dealer and make him someone by which all the families of the earth will be blessed? It's a journey of transformation, which we'll follow starting after next Sunday.

For now, we can take hope from the fact that God elected Jacob to be a blessing, and used Jacob to bring about God's promises, life-giving promises that will never fail. Nothing can keep them from becoming real for us. And if we are willing, God will use us to bring about those blessings. God will work through whomever God wants to work through to make that happen. You may feel at times like you're not worthy of that, that you don't have the right gifts or the proper amount of faith to be used by God. But if God can use a stuttering shepherd like Moses, if God can use a swindling trickster like Jacob, then God can certainly use flawed people like you and me to bring about God's kingdom here on this earth. God wants to use you!